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ABSTRACT

A traveling seminar and support program offered to beginning vocational education teachers by the University of Wyoming's Department of Vocational Education was successful in combating rural isolation and the absence of inservice training opportunities. Teachers shared problems and observed new instructional techniques during weekend meetings held in central locations throughout the state. Group processes were used to discover solutions to problems raised by participants. Teachers were asked to try the new techniques and to bring evidence of results to the next meeting. Staff from the state department of education, master teachers, and university staff visited participants to observe local conditions, provide assistance and motivation, and introduce new technology and management techniques. Staff met to determine teachers' progress and identify trouble spots in the program. Similar problems were identified by beginning teachers in each year of the four-year program. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to discuss problems and ideas with peers. University program staff gained better understanding of classroom teacher needs and of the transformation process of applying theory to practice. A prioritized list of problems identified by teachers is included. (LFL)

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YOUNG TEACHER SEMINAR
A MODEL FOR RURAL TEACHER EDUCATION IN-SERVICE

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Young Teacher Seminar - A Model

for Rural Teacher Education Inservice

Abstract

Because of the unique nature of rural teacher's individual inservice needs, rural isolation and lack of inservice availability from conventional approaches as well as lack of quality inservice mechanisms within many rural schools, the Department of Vocational Education instituted a traveling seminar and support program for teachers of vocational subjects in Wyoming. Weekend meetings were held at central locations to provide teachers the opportunity to share problems, develop solutions to their problems, and observe new techniques in instruction. Group processes were heavily relied on to discover solutions to problems raised.

In addition, staff from the state department of education and master teachers, as well as university staff visited participants on site to observe local conditions, provide assistance, and motivate the teachers to strive for excellence. Pedagogical techniques were shared and reinforced, new technology was introduced, curriculum was developed and shared, and departmental management techniques were introduced.

Between seminar meetings, teachers were asked to try new approaches and to bring evidence of the results to the next class to share with the group.

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Conferences were conducted among state department of education staff, master teachers and university staff to determine teachers' progress and identify potential trouble spots. Contact was also maintained with local administrators to assist in reinforcing teachers in their professional development.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers in rural schools have a unique need for in-service during their first year of teaching. They often find themselves in a department of one, floundering through problems of budgets, curriculum revisions, and management of laboratories with very few local sources of assistance. And, until recently, seldom was any contact made by university staff or state department of education personnel until the first teaching year was completed; then the meeting was, at best, a casual, brief week at a state-wide vocational teachers' conference. At these conferences, where the in-service programs were a potpourri of subject matter related mini-workshops, it was doubtful that serious concerns held by the vocational rural teachers were being addressed.

Beginning teachers in rural schools often find themselves too far away from a community where the university finds it convenient to offer evening extension classes. These teachers also find limited opportunities to share problems with fellow teachers in similar subject matter fields. Frequently, the young, rural teacher also finds the locally conducted in-service programs to be of a generic nature as well.

Beginning teachers in rural areas, especially, need the opportunity to share problems and successes with colleagues. They need to maintain contact with teacher education staff at the university to obtain guidance and assistance in transferring theory into practice. They desperately need to have the opportunity to ask for help and obtain that much needed advice at the time when major problems are faced. Relationships with State Department of Education consultants need to be established early in order that this important avenue of communication is made available early in the teacher's career.

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The experiences that beginning teachers encounter during that first, formative year, whether successful or unfortunate, have a major effect on the habits and pedagogical practices maintained during their professional lifetime. By providing assistance to these teachers, helping them with curriculum decisions, student motivation problems, classroom teaching techniques, budgeting, facility management, youth organizations, community resource utilization, and budgeting of time, opportunities for more success and less failure are enhanced.

THE MODEL

The vehicle for delivering this much needed assistance was initiated through the university's extension class program. Each year, the beginning teachers in the various subject areas in vocational education were organized into a common graduate level course. Three group seminars were scheduled for the year--fall, midwinter, and spring--utilizing the weekend to reduce time spent away from school. Sessions were begun on Friday evenings,meeting as a total group. Saturday sessions were devoted to smaller subject area group sessions.

After the first meeting in the fall, university staff began visiting participants at their schools, observing classes, becoming familiar with the beginning teachers' facilities and resources, and conferring with the teachers, providing assistance and guidance. In addition, brief conferences were held with the building principals to further encourage local support for the beginning teacher.

State Department of Education personnel were also requested to participate in group meetings and visit participants on site.

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The method of conducting the seminars was believed to be critical to insure program success. Group processes were relied upon heavily to insure a high level of participation. A majority of the first meeting's agenda was devoted to listening to the teachers relate their specific problems encountered in their respective schools. These identified problems and concerns were prioritized by the group which created the course outline of topics discussed for the remainder of the program.

At each meeting and visit, ideas and new approaches were shared to help the beginning teachers arrive at solutions to their problems. They were encouraged to experiment with new approaches and bring evidence of the results to the next class meeting. When on-site visits were made, an attempt was made to provide guidance and assistance based upon the teacher's individual needs and available resources. The list of problems and concerns was reviewed to guide the university staff member in choosing materials to bring along that would help the rural teacher with a specific problem.

RESULTS

The effects of the group's involvement in identifying and discussing their own problems were therapeutic. At the end of the first meeting, comments such as "I'm glad I'm not the only one having that problem," and "I guess my problem is not so impossible after all," were heard.

It was of interest to note the similarity of problems identified by beginning teachers compared across the four years that the program has been conducted. Also, it was of interest to note the priority level

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placed upon the problems identified. A list of problems identified which were rated highest priority of importance by the four groups follows:

-how to motivate students

-what should be taught

-how to grade students

-how to determine teaching time

-keeping updated on information/technology

-how to handle parents

-advising the youth organization

-how to manage time

Other problem areas identified and rated the highest priority of importance by a group of beginning teachers in a particular year but not in each year were:

-how to answer the "time on task" critics

-obtaining financial support

-changing program image

-obtaining administrative support

-recruitment of students

-how to work with special education students

-how to become involved in the community

-how to select texts, references, resources

-how to plan individualized instruction

-how to maintain proper relationships with students

-how to justify time spent out of school

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There were many other concerns and problems identified upon which the teachers placed a lower priority. A lower priority rating meant that the participants desired help with the problems at a later time. As many of the lower rated items as possible were discussed as time allowed, both in the seminar sessions and during the on-site visits.

Comments from the teachers at the end of the course were most complimentary. The most common type of comment related to the organizational approach of the seminars. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to express their own specific problems and discuss freely among peers, solutions and ideas to incorporate into their respective local programs.

The benefits to the university staff were also sizeable. A better understanding of the nature of the classroom teacher's job was developed. Closer relationships with beginning teachers paid dividends in the form of more teachers pursuing a master's degree. A much better understanding of the transformation process of applying theory into practice was obtained from the experience.

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